

Sermonette by Robert Schmid

LOVE THE STRANGER!

2000 years ago when Jesus Christ was brought before Pontius Pilot, who was Governor of Judea, Pilot asked Jesus the age old question: "*What is truth?*" Now, nobody believes that Pilot was really interested in truth, and neither did Jesus Christ, and so He never gave him an answer. However, in John 17 where Christ prayed to His Father, He answered the question when He said: "***Thy Word is truth***".

And of course the Father's Word is His Son Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus Christ is the truth. In fact in John 14 Jesus Christ said "***I am the truth***".

As simple as that sounds, we all know that it is not that simple, because when men steps into the picture and begins to interpret the truth - interprets Jesus Christ the Word, which of course is the Bible, we end up with all kinds of interpretations of the truth which separates and divides all of Christianity, including the Churches of God.

My purpose today is not to define truth beyond what I already said, but to ask the question: **How important is truth?**

That there is controversy about the truth we are all well aware of. That we should search for the truth I think is obvious. That we should stand up for and defend the truth is obviously a noble goal. The question that needs to be answered is: How far should you go, or what actions should you take to defend **your** interpretation of the truth?

I said **your** interpretation of the truth, because we know that all of our understanding, all of our truth is imperfect and incomplete.

Now the very fact that we are talking about our interpretation of the truth should give you an indication of where I am going and what this sermonette is all about, but let me explain with the following true historical events.

Back in 1915 there was a French literary Nobel Prize recipient by the name of Romain Rolland. In one of his writings he said the following, and I quote:

"You should love truth more than yourself, but your neighbor more than truth".

Let me repeat this and please write it down for it is the basis of this sermonette. He said: "You should love truth more than yourself, but neighbor more than truth".

He based his statement on Deut.10:19 and I'll come back to that later. For now remember the question is: **How important is truth? And how far should you go defending truth?**

To make the point, I like to share with you the true story of two individuals who were convicted of a point of truth, but as we shall see, defended their belief with quite different consequences.

In Geneva Switzerland there is a cemetery with the grave stone - a monument - of a Spanish theologian and physician by the name of Miguel Serveto. This monument, it is said, is a perpetual reminder for Reformed Christians of a very shameful act that was committed against Senior Serveto. By the way, "Reformed Christians" were those who came out of Catholicism and became followers of Luther, Calvin and other Reformers.

Miguel Serveto was born in 1511 in Spain. He was a physician and theologian and studied law in Toulouse France. He traveled extensively throughout Europe and became acquainted with leaders of the reformation that took place at that time.

In 1531 he published a book with the Latin title "De trinitatis erroribus" which expressed his belief that the trinity doctrine was in error. In addition to the trinity doctrine, he opposed many other concepts of the reform movement and so found himself in opposition to both the Catholic and the newly evolving Protestant Church.

In 1536 he went to Paris to study medicine. He became prominent, and from 1541 to 1553 he was the personal physician to the archbishop of Vienne. During all this time though, his belief that the trinity was in error had not changed, and so in 1553 he published, secretly, a theological tract expressing his views.

When he was found out he was arrested and imprisoned as a heretic. He escaped, but was recaptured 4 months later in Geneva Switzerland. By the way, a heretic is "one who opposes orthodox theology", "a dissenter from established church dogma", "a nonconformist". As we can see Serveto defended what he considered truth by going to prison, but that was only the beginning of his troubles.

During this time, John Calvin the French theologian and reformer, was at the height of his influence in Geneva and Europe. Calvin, in his love for God and his interpretation of truth, however showed little love for his neighbor, especially when someone challenged the beloved trinity doctrine. And so, upon the insistence of John Calvin, Miguel Serveto was charged with heresy and blasphemy, and again on the insistence of John Calvin he was executed and burned at the stake on Oct. 27, 1553.

Now to give you an idea of the mind-set of sixteenth century defenders of the truth, let me quote from the Encyclopedia where it says that "the capital punishment of Serveto aroused such a furor that for the first time the execution of heretics was seriously questioned by theologians". Can you believe this? For the first time it dawned on them that maybe, maybe there is something wrong with what they were doing. Up until then, that was the thing to do. If you stood your ground on a point of truth, other than what the theologians said, they simply killed you, burning you to death on the stake.

Now let's go back to where we started: **“You should love truth more than yourself, but neighbor more than truth.”** Can you see how Serveto and Calvin are examples of this saying? Serveto loved truth more than himself and gave his life to defend his belief. He could have

recanted. Calvin on the other hand loved truth more than his neighbor and took his neighbors life. So much for the people that brought us the reformation.

Let's turn to Deut. 10:19. Here God through Moses instructs us to: "***Love the stranger therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt***".

Now a stranger or sojourner is generally one who is not part of God's people Israel, one who has different beliefs, worships a different god, and embraces truth contrary to our own. And yet God instructs us to love that person.

Now John Calvin and many other well meaning theologians who had the same Bible - the same truth as you and I, somehow interpreted the simple and plain truth of "**Love the stranger**" to mean "**kill the stranger**", "burn him alive on the stake".

I don't know how they came to that conclusion, but I suppose they were all very sincere!

Why does God want us to love the person from a different country (church organization), with different beliefs, or for that matter, why does he want us to love the person that sits next to you, who believes differently than you? He wants us to love them, because at one time we - you and I - were strangers, and had odd and different beliefs. That's why we ought to **love the stranger**.

I didn't say "agree" with the stranger!

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians put it this way, he said: "*Remember that you were once separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers of the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household, the family of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone - Christ Jesus Himself being the truth.*"

How important is truth? Well, that depends on how important Jesus Christ is to you!

How far should you go defending truth?

Miguel Serveto went so far that he gave his life. He loved truth more than himself.

You have to decide how far you are willing and able to go defending your beliefs and living your convictions.

John Calvin, the theologian, on the other hand, loved his interpretation of truth more than neighbor, and killed him.

So, what's the conclusion? Stand up for truth, yes - but never defend your beliefs, never defend truth if in the process you sin against the stranger, if in the process you forget to love your neighbor as yourself, if in the process you sin against your God.

So, remember the words of Romain Rolland.

"You should love truth more than yourself, but your neighbor more than truth."